

(An edited version of this appeared in *The Macon Telegraph*, January 10, 2004 )

Christmas, 2003

"Hooah, Sir." It's the modern Army's version of an enthusiastic "Yes, Sir!" If I heard it once, I heard it hundreds of times during the last full week of 2003. "Hooah," a term reserved for insiders - those wearing our nation's uniform. "Hooah." No matter who said it – from private to general officer – the tone was always positive and proud.

I heard all these Hooahs in Iraq, Afghanistan and Kuwait where I traveled from Dec. 21 to 28, 2003 at the invitation of Gen. Pete Schoomaker, CSA (Chief of Staff of the Army). The travel party consisted of just Pete and me and his immediate staff. I was along to observe, listen, question, talk with and thank soldiers and to otherwise participate as Pete saw fit. In November, I'd asked the Army to let me spend a few days on the ground with soldiers in the worst part of Iraq, just to get a better feel for their task – our task. Pete's invitation was the reply to my request.

The precise itinerary, even the trip itself, was kept secret for security reasons. For weeks before the trip, when asked about my Christmas recess plans, I replied that I "hoped" to get back to Iraq. I felt a bit guilty about phrasing it that way since the plans for this trip were already set. My real "hope" was that the trip wouldn't be canceled because of some stupid security breach.

Why the need for such security? Simple. Killing Pete Schoomaker would be quite a coup for our enemies. Killing a Member of Congress wouldn't be too bad either, but chump change compared to killing the Commanding General of the Army of the United States. Pete's mere presence, if known to the enemy, would make things far more dangerous for the soldiers around him.

Secrecy avoids this problem. For example, with no more than ordinary risk, we traveled by night in a small convoy of five armored humvees deep into Ar Ramadi, a city in the heart of the violent Sunni triangle. There we paid a brief, surprise visit to the

provincial police chief and hundreds of heavily armed Iraqi police officers. Pete's purpose was to send a loud and clear message throughout the Sunni triangle that the threat of IEDs and ambushes would not deter us from the business of reconstructing Iraq. For my part, when introduced as a Member of Congress, I brought "greetings from President Bush." I didn't seek the President's permission to do that in advance, but I'm sure he won't mind. His greeting had quite a positive effect on the crowd.

That police chief won't forget our visit. Neither will I. Nor will I forget attending midnight mass Christmas Eve with soldiers in Bagram, Afghanistan, having coffee and pie at 4:00 a.m. with two sergeants heading to bed after pulling sentry duty for most of the night, kidding around with BG Lloyd Austin, a native of Thomasville, Georgia who now commands the 10th Mountain Division in Afghanistan, visiting soldiers hospitalized in Germany on our way back to the states, the confident bearing of a young sapper who insisted he was the best heavy equipment operator in the Army, the cold night we spent in a tent when the heater failed, the sophisticated rock climbing gear included in a weapons cache uncovered by Special Forces soldiers, Pete's graciousness and the sheer joy and excitement of soldiers who met him or had their pictures taken with him, the pride in soldiers standing at attention as Combat Infantry Badges were pinned to their chests, and an identical pride in two staff sergeants standing at attention by their hospital beds in Germany as Pete pinned the Purple Heart on their chests, each wounded by an IED, one on the left side and one on the right, mirror images.

But most of all, I'll never forget the privilege of being able to thank thousands of soldiers for their service, for risking their lives to protect and enhance the lives of my children and all others throughout the world.

We visited every Army division in Iraq, Afghanistan and Kuwait, and most of their sub units. At each stop we would talk with soldiers in gatherings as small as a dozen to crowds of hundreds. Pete would speak first, telling them what they were doing was important, that he was proud of them, that the country was proud of them, that the country thanked them, that they should keep it up and be proud of themselves, that they were giving a gift to our country, that they could give no better gift this time of year.

Pete would then introduce me as a Congressman who had spent a Christmas away from home in the Vietnam War as an Army Ranger staff sergeant. It's something I wish I could say to all of our young soldiers and anyone thinking about being a soldier. It's a message I think any old soldier would give.

I want to say something in my official capacity and then something personal. I'm Member of Congress and of the Armed Services Committee. As such I know I speak on behalf of the entire Congress of the United States, which represents all of the people of the United States. Thank you. We're proud of you. No matter what your role, if we are successful in this endeavor, then you have helped to immeasurably improve the security of our country and its future. We cannot thank you enough.

Now let me talk with you personally. And I especially want to talk to the young soldiers in this crowd.

As I look through these eyes at each of you, I see myself. But then I recall what I look like when these same eyes see my face in a mirror. We are different in at least one respect. I am old and you are young. Most of you weren't born when I spent a Christmas in Vietnam in 1969. It's been more than thirty years since I left the Army. And I figure I've got another thirty or more good years ahead of me.

Pete said you are giving an extraordinary gift to our country. He's right. What he knows but didn't say, is that you are also giving an extraordinary gift to yourselves. As I look back at the things I have done in my life – and I've done a lot and will do a lot more – my time in the Army and especially my time in combat stands out as unique. I cherish it. You will too.

When older Americans are asked what they would have done differently with their lives, they say they would have taken more risk, more chances. You will never forget what you are doing for your country right here, right now. If you do it right, you will always look back with pride, as someone a cut above the person you might have been had you not taken this risk, this chance. Enjoy every precious boring, hot, cold, lonely, scary, frustrating, sad or happy minute you have in this place, this time. It is special. It makes you one of the privileged few.

I cannot adequately express what an honor it is to stand here with you. I hope you survive without harm. May God bless you and watch over you. Thank you for the risk you take on behalf of my children and others around the globe. You're extraordinary Americans. HOOAH!!

By the way, the Army is meeting and exceeding its recruitment and reenlistment goals. Those wanting a chance at greatness better get in line.